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TITLE: Faith-Based Initiatives: Preaching Beyond the Choir

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ISSUE: In the African-American community, the church is a significant social force and provides a number of services and resources. However, HIV/AIDS often remains stigmatized in the community despite the extraordinary over-representation of AIDS cases among African Americans. This stigmatization and a lack of appropriate resources have created barriers to realizing the full potential of the religious community as a source of HIV prevention and services.

SETTING: An interface between the religious community and state HIV prevention programs.

PROJECT: To address this issue, the HIV/AIDS Program (HAP) of the Louisiana Office of Public Health established an Interfaith Advisory Committee. The volunteers for the Advisory Committee were recruited at a large conference, specifically designed for religious leaders to discuss the need for providing effective HIV/AIDS ministry. The conference also served to identify HIV/AIDS-related activities currently being conducted in the religious community.

RESULTS: Approximately one-fourth to one-third of the conference participants indicated that some type of HIV prevention or care activity was currently underway in their churches. The smallest percentage of participants indicated HIV prevention work in the community (23%) and the largest said that they discuss HIV/AIDS in sermons (32%). AIDS prevention education within the church and assistance to persons with AIDS were both mentioned by 29% of participants. Volunteers from the conference attendees were recruited to form the Interfaith Advisory Committee. In its first of several planned meetings this committee will formulate a strategic plan to address the issues raised in the conference, specifically the role of the church in reaching youth, creating opportunities to share information, and dealing with politically sensitive interventions like needle availability.

LESSONS LEARNED: The overall positive response to the conference and the large number of volunteers for the Interfaith Advisory Committee indicates that the religious community can become a valuable ally in the fight against HIV. Moreover, in politically or socially conservative climates, they may prove to be essential.

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